

Connecting and misconnecting with children and their feelings

The words to say it using PACE (acceptance, curiosity, empathy)

| Ways of discounting a child's feelings | Examples of lacking empathy and curiosity | Underlying psychological message to the child, where there is no acceptance, curiosity or empathy | Responses that are accepting/curious/empathic |
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| Disapproving | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Stop crying.' • 'Come on, don't make a fuss.' • 'Don't get angry.' • 'Now just stop that right now.' | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You are wrong to have that feeling. • I'm not comfortable dealing with your feelings. • This is a bad feeling to have. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'I can see you are really angry/upset/disappointed by this.' • 'It's really fine for you to feel like this.' • If the child is not behaving in a safe way and you need limit-setting: 'It's really fine to feel this, but I need you to be safe so I'm going to stop you doing x....' |
| Dismissing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Come on now cheer up.' • 'Don't be silly.' • 'It's nothing to worry about.' • 'Let's have a smile from you.' • 'Just forget about it/move on.' | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't have the feeling you are having. Have a nicer feeling instead. • Your feelings are not important. • You are a burden; you need to change your feelings to suit me. • You are not worth listening to. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'I can see that you are really angry with me for doing x.' • 'So x is really painful for you.' • 'So x makes you mad.' • 'No wonder you are feeling x. It's hurtful when y.' |
| Defensive e.g. child says 'I hate you' | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Don't you dare...' • 'Don't talk to me like that.' • Guilt inducing responses – 'I've spent all morning with you and then you go and...' | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You are someone who makes other people feel bad. • Feel ashamed. • Feel guilty. • It's your fault. • Feel bad about who you are. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'I am sorry I raised my voice. I needed you to stop (hurting x) but I should have found another way.' • 'I realise I got triggered by you doing x. I apologise.' • 'I can hear just how cross and angry you are with me.' • Empathising with the negative transference: 'So you are seeing me as someone who is being really unfair... and if you are seeing me like that, I can imagine you may be feeling pretty angry with me right now.' • Parent: 'I will come back in 5 minutes when I've thought of a good way for us to solve this problem' (essential time away to self-regulate). |
| Deflecting/ distracting | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changing the subject. • 'Don't worry, let's look at this book. Shall we go and play in the sand?' • 'Be brave.' | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stop feeling what you are feeling. • In deflecting, the child's behaviour can escalate – as they don't feel heard. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Validating empathy: 'No wonder you're feeling x. It is painful when y happens.' |
| Diminishing the child's experience by comparing it to that of another, or to your own experience | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'It's not that bad, Bobby has had much worse than that and he's ok.' • 'I know just what you are feeling because it happened to me.' • 'You're making a mountain out of a molehill.' | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You are just making a fuss. • You shouldn't be feeling this. • Your painful feelings aren't really that painful. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Thank you for having the courage to let me know just what you are feeling right now.' • 'So, you're letting me know that you are feeling really miserable right now.... I can understand that...' |
| Patronising | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Look, when we feel angry what we need to do is xx.' • 'You are just tired.' • 'Now now come on, pull yourself together.' | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I know better than you. • What you feel is irrelevant, unimportant. • Your feelings are not warranted given the situation. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Will you help me to understand what that felt like for you...?' (curiosity) • 'Will you let me know what might help you right now? If I was really helping you in the way you need right now, what should I be saying/doing now?' |

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| Advice giving, lecturing, solution focusing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Now what you need to do is...' • 'You should have, you could've...' • 'Just don't think about it anymore.' | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't feel what you are feeling, just act or think instead. • You always get it wrong, other children know how to do things better. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wait until they are calm: 'Let's think together about what might be best to do now.' • 'I'm wondering if we can think together of another way to deal with x as it's not OK to x.' |
| Clichés | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Life's hard, life's not fair, man up, big boys don't cry, welcome to the real world, you need to be the man of the house now.' | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am all wrong, my feelings are all wrong. (Shaming) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Model a full range of feelings with vocabulary to match the intensity of the child's feeling 'So I guess you felt heart-broken.' (instead of a bit sad) • 'Sounds like you are furious with me.' (instead of a bit cross). |
| Questioning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Why did you do this?' • 'Why do you feel like this?' • 'Why do you feel angry?' • 'Are you angry now?' (requires yes/no answer) • 'Are you sad now?' (requires yes/no answer) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Think about your feelings, stop feeling them. • Stress inducing and drives disconnection. • 'Why' questions move the child away from what they are feeling into thinking. Questions without empathy are never therapeutic. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curiosity 'Will you help me understand what you were feeling then?/How it felt when x happened?...' |
| Overwhelming, overinvolved, Merging | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Oh, my poor baby.' • 'Oh, this is dreadful, see now I am crying too.' • 'I feel frightened by what you are saying.' | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look after my feelings as well as your own. • Take care of me now. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show or say you are moved. Tears are fine, sobbing uncontrollably is not!! Don't say you are scared by what they are saying otherwise they now have to deal with your feelings as well as their own. • 'We must suffer the [child's] pain without getting lost in it.' (Grotstein, 2005) • 'The [child] is dependent on the adult's courage to experience what he cannot experience so it's safe to experience it.' (Grotstein, 2005) |
| Ignoring | 'No response, or minimal response.' | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your feelings don't matter. • I will only pay attention to you if you stop feeling what you are feeling. • Ignored feelings can become part of what's known as the <i>unvalidated unconscious</i> (feelings that are never fully felt because in infancy they have never been validated by the parent). So these children end up not knowing what they feel. (Stolorow and Atwood, 1989) • Children for whom <i>broad areas</i> of [felt] experience failed to evoke validating attunement in caregivers and, consequently, perceptions remain ill defined and feelings tend to be felt as diffuse bodily states. (Robert Stolorow, 1989) • That which becomes off-limits in the communication with the parent eventually becomes off-limits [for the person themselves] – even in the privacy of their inner life. (Diana Fosha, 2000, p 40). • These unvalidated feelings can then transform into challenging behaviour or become psychosomatic symptoms because they have never evolved from bodily sensations to being symbolised in words (via the adult's accepting, empathising use of mental state talk). |  |